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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BAKU 001444

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SUBJECT: AZERBAIJAN'S OCTOBER 6 MUNICIPAL ELECTIONS: ALL  
POLITICS ARE LOCAL

REF: BAKU 1019

Classified By: AMBASSADOR ANNE E. DERSE PER 1.4(B,D)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: As Azerbaijan prepares to hold partial municipal elections on October 6, campaigning has proceeded quietly and calmly, with far greater interest in rural areas than in Baku. 4,562 candidates remain in competition for 1,931 seats. Candidates are actively campaigning by word-of-mouth; because the majority of municipalities participating in the elections are comprised of small villages, media-based campaign methods are not necessary. The issues dominating debate are primarily matters of living conditions and infrastructure: unemployment, the lack of adequate water supply, poor access to schools and hospitals, and the high price of agricultural inputs. Central Election Commission (CEC) posters notifying the population of the upcoming elections are displayed on virtually all public buildings in the participating municipalities. Both the candidates and the Constituency Election Commissions' (ConECs) members are convinced that most of the population is aware of the elections, and expect high voter turn-out. In coordination with the international community, post will observe voting on October 6. END SUMMARY

#### ELECTIONS LOGISTICS

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¶2. (C) Rovzat Gasimov, Head of the International Relations Department of the CEC reports that countrywide, campaign season is running quite smoothly. As of September 28, only one complaint had been filed. This was from a group of candidates from ConEC 59 (Salyan), who had been illegally occupying 25 hectares of land, which rendered them ineligible as candidates. The Municipal Council insisted that the candidates either become legal residents or withdraw their candidacies. After investigating the situation, the CEC ruled the complaint invalid.

¶3. (C) As printed on the official ballots, 4,562 candidates remain in competition for a total of 1,931 seats. 248 of these candidates are women, approximately five percent. 32 international observers and 9,016 local observers are registered. According to Gasimov, 3,209 of the local observers are affiliated with various political parties. In a September 14 statement to the press, CEC secretary Natiq Mammadov said that none of the international organizations have appealed to the CEC to conduct exit polls. Mammadov said that the CEC and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs had solicited several organizations, but had not yet received any response. According to Mammadov, the CEC does not interfere in the conduct of exit polls, and prefers that they are conducted by "influential and neutral" organizations.

#### CONEC MEMBERS COMMENT ON ELECTION CLIMATE

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14. (C) In a late-August trip through Azerbaijan's central-southern regions, Poloff met with approximately 60 candidates from the villages of Khanlarkand and Cholpi, both in the Saatli region; Mamishlar, in the Sabirabad region, and Mazrali, in the Imishli region, as well as members of the ConECs from each region. The members of the ConECs told Poloff that they were following all of the CEC-prescribed fraud-prevention measures. ConEC members have noticed a tendency of word-of-mouth campaigning, particularly in the small villages where media-based campaigning is not necessary. Overall, the ConECs anticipate a voter turnout of between fifty and fifty-five percent. According to Arif Aliyev, the Chairman of ConEC 62 (Saatli), the recent internal disputes within several opposition parties have not hurt candidate participation in the Municipal Elections. Aliyev said that the opposition's decision to boycott the elections has hurt party membership rather than participation in the elections - a phenomenon reflected in the registration of approximately half of this constituency's candidates as independent. (Note: The opposition Azadliq bloc is boycotting the elections, as is Musavat, but the latter granted party members permission to run as independents.) One member of ConEC 63 said that since the 2003 Presidential Elections, he has noticed a growing interest in the elections process. He said that for the first time during the 2005 Parliamentary Elections, voters cared enough about the outcome of the elections to file complaints of fraud and irregularities. Members of the other ConECs noted similar trends in their respective regions.

#### CANDIDATES EXPLAIN THE ISSUES...

15. (C) By far, the biggest issue raised by candidates from

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Saatli, Sabirabad, and Imishli was the lack of water supply - critical in this agriculturally-dominated area. The candidates - the majority of whom are farmers representing constituencies largely comprised of farmers - expressed frustration that their crops were "dying in the sun," rendering them unable to provide for their families. Candidates in the other regions noted the inadequate infrastructure for both irrigation and drinking water. Many complained that even if they were able to water their crops, they cannot afford the high price of other agricultural inputs, such as the chemicals necessary to treat the crops, and that they have no access to loans or lines of credit that would allow them to purchase the technical equipment needed to cultivate their land. In addition, farmers are experiencing increasing difficulty in selling their crops at a reasonable price. Several candidates explained to Poloff that the current low price of cotton does not make it possible to make a profit. They said that because of the lack of competition, two local cotton monopolies keep the price artificially low. Candidates in Mamishlar also said that they face similar problems with growing wheat: that because mills are purchasing cheaper wheat from abroad, local farmers are unable to sell their product.

16. (C) Other than agricultural issues, problems with infrastructure, such as the lack of access to schools and hospitals and the poor quality of roads topped candidates' concerns, as did unemployment. Candidates in Cholpi said that their children have to walk an unreasonable distance to the nearest school, which is a particular problem in the winter, because many families cannot afford the warm clothing necessary to protect children from harsh weather. Residents of several of the other villages said that they are located closer to schools, but worry that the nearest hospitals are located too far away to be accessed quickly in the case of an emergency. In addition, trained medical professionals - similar to professionals in many other fields - have little incentive to stay in the regions, preferring to work in Baku. Unemployment plagues each of these villages - outside of agriculture, options are severely limited. One candidate from

Mezrali said that the newly-constructed Imishli Sugar Factory, which is credited with bringing much-needed development to the region and employs approximately 2,000 workers, is located too far away to be a viable employment option for most villagers.

...AND ADDRESS GOAJ EFFORTS  
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17. (C) A few candidates touched upon President Aliyev's Regional Development Program, explaining that although there has been some improvement of roads under the program, it has done nothing concerning the lack of water supply. One candidate from Mamishlar said that the program benefits the regional centers, but not the villages, and that the projects are not helping with unemployment, because locals do not possess the technical skills required for the jobs that have been created. Many candidates said that they have raised these problems with their Members of Parliament (MPs), with varied results. Those in MP Jalal Aliyev's constituency complained that they had only seen Aliyev a handful of times, and that he had made promises but never followed through. (Note: Aliyev is the uncle of President Ilham Aliyev and is an influential member of the ruling party.) In contrast, those in opposition MP Iltizam Akbarli's constituency said that Akbarli is quite concerned with their problems and has been helpful, but that because of the limited authority of MPs in Azerbaijan, he has not been able to do enough. Virtually all candidates complained of the response from local government officials, saying that because the municipalities are unable to collect taxes from the impoverished citizenry, they have been rendered useless. Many also said that the local Executive Committee (ExComm) offices make the situation worse. For example, several candidates complained that the Imishli ExComm office interferes in the distribution of municipal lands, ensuring that prime pieces of land are given to their friends and families.

COMMENT  
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18. (C) The flurry of pre-elections chatter in these villages is a stark contrast from Baku, where there is scarce mention of the Municipal Elections -- likely because none of Baku's municipal seats will be contested on October 6. Although rural candidates are not campaigning with posters and large events, they are very involved in spreading the word about their candidacies through conversations in tea houses and other gathering spots. The dominant issues are by far bread and butter political issues -- voters are concerned with problems that directly affect their standard of living. In

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coordination with other members of the international community, post will observe voting on October 6, and will continue to urge locally elected officials to play a greater role in government.

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